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A German View of Irish Catholicism

EAMON MAHER

Is the fact of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature any guarantee of gaining fame for posterity? Heinrich Böll (1917-1985) was one of three German writers (the other two being Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse) to receive the award in the last century and yet one rarely encounters much discussion of his works any more; he is, of course, still studied in certain universities. I remember going to see the film version of one of his novels, *The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum*, at the end of the 1970s. It is a kind of political thriller and it didn't do much for me; it failed to encourage me to read anything by its author.

It was on discovering that Böll had written an *Irish Journal*, describing a stay in this country during the 1950s, that I decided to read some of his works, which I found fascinating. His particular brand of Catholicism owes much to the tradition of the French Catholic writers of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Péguy, Bloy, Bernanos and Mauriac, whose influence he admitted in interviews and articles. A layman who was fascinated with religious dilemmas, he refused to conform to dictates handed down from on high. He chose instead to tease out his own version of what it meant to be a Catholic in a world (particularly in his native Germany) that had been subjected to the trauma of war and disillusionment with authority, be it ecclesiastical or political.

I propose now to discuss Böll's view of Irish Catholicism in his *Irish Journal* and to compare it to the vision he portrays of this same religion in one of his best-known novels, *The Clown* (1963), situated in Germany. It is most revealing to see how different the two situations are. On the one hand you have a country, Ireland, which has not long since achieved

independence from British rule and which tends to view Catholicism as being inseparable from nationalist identity. On the other there is Germany, the home of the Reformation, where Catholicism is just one of many Christian traditions and where its followers are forced to interact and debate with people of other religious convictions. If Böll's portrait of Irish life and religious practice is a romanticised one, it is probably because the situation he encounters here differs so much from his native Germany. He sees Ireland as a type of spiritual Eldorado, with the people attending Mass and religious services in huge numbers. He also detects a genuine spiritual fervour among those he encounters.

The *Irish Journal* describes, as we have said, a visit to Ireland in the mid-1950s. One of the first observations Böll makes is the fact that Ireland holds the record for the ordination of new priests. A small diocese is Ireland would produce as many as, and more than the whole Archdiocese of Cologne. For all that, Böll overhears a conversation between a woman and a priest in the ferry bringing them to Ireland that is far from complimentary towards the Church. The woman declares that she doesn't believe in God, or in *Kathleen ní Houlihan* for that matter, that fairy-tale land of Saints and Scholars:

'I've a brother myself who is a priest, and two cousins, they're the only ones in the whole family who have cars.'¹

Life in London has given this lady a different view of her native land. The priest is obviously uncomfortable with such an irreverential attitude but has little choice other than to endure it. It is likely that he is looking forward to getting back to his more obedient flock at home. Böll doesn't see the need to comment on the interlude, other than to quote snippets from the conversation. We are not privy to his own thoughts on the exchange. When he gets to Dublin, however, no such reticence is in evidence as he describes the numbers attending a religious ceremony:

[S]o I was left with the impression of an overwhelming piety as it flooded Westland Row after the *Tantum ergo*: in Germany you would only see that many people coming out of the church after Easter Mass or at Christmas. (*Irish Journal*, p. 10)

1. *Irish Journal*, trans. Leila Vennewitz, London: Vintage, 2000, p. 4.

He continues in the same vein:

Schoolboys with hurling sticks under their arms pray at the Stations of the Cross; tiny oil lamps burn in dark corners in front of the Sacred Heart, the Little Flower, St Anthony, St Francis; here religion is savoured to the last drop. (pp. 16-17)

The commitment of Irish people to the externals of their religion is obvious. Hindsight is a great thing, yet we know now that much of this fervour was generated by a blind faith that never sought to question or challenge the Church's teaching on any issue. There was little, if any, debate on questions of faith or dogma. No Catholic lay intellectuals emerged in Ireland, like, say, in France or Germany, to put forward contrary views to those of the clergy. It is all well and good to attend religious services in great numbers and to display outward piety, but that is not necessarily an indication of a healthy inner life. Ireland was indeed proud of her Catholic heritage (she had fought hard enough to be allowed practice it down the centuries) but one is entitled to ask if its inhabitants would have been better served in the long run to consider what exactly living a Christian life entails. Fatalistic acceptance of every affliction and woe that comes your way is a typical Irish trait, as Böll points out in such an amusing manner:

... if you break a leg, miss a train, go bankrupt, they say: It could be worse; instead of a leg you might have broken your neck, instead of a train you might have missed Heaven, and instead of going bankrupt you might have lost your peace of mind, and going bankrupt is no reason at all for that. What happens is never the worst; on the contrary, what's worse never happens. (*Irish Journal*, p. 109)

This is a very keen insight into the Irish character. The *Journal* contains many such observations and anecdotes. Böll discusses emigration, drinking tea, the birth-rate, and, of course, the demon drink, in a way that illustrates an excellent understanding of the Irish psyche. Take the example of Seamus, the thirsty man from the West of Ireland, who has difficulties with the Sunday licensing laws that prevent him from having a drink:

He curses the government, probably also curses the clergy, who stubbornly cling to this incomprehensible law (just as in Ireland the clergy

have the last word when it comes to granting pub licences, deciding on closing times, dances), this sweating thirsty Seamus who a few hours ago was standing so reverent, so candidly pious in church listening to the Gospel. (*Irish Journal*, p. 87)

All through the *Journal* we see paradoxes of this nature. Fierce commitment to Catholicism does not preclude opposition to some actions by the clergy. There is also a tendency by Irish people to ignore what doesn't suit in the practice of religion. Ireland is without doubt a loyal servant of Rome, and Böll notes this throughout his account. (He says that her Gallic sister, France, is no longer as faithful as she might claim to be to Catholicism.)

When he writes his Epilogue thirteen years later, however, the situation has changed dramatically. Industrial development has brought in its wake sexual liberation (Böll makes special reference to the Pill which he records with regret will mean fewer children will be born here) and a faster pace of life. In their mad dash to make more money, people no longer have the same inclination to sit down and talk. There is a certain amount of disappointment in the writer's tone at the changes that have come with progress. He doesn't take into consideration the fact that people were better off in the 1960s than in the previous decade, that there was now an optimism about the future to replace the fatalism of the first half of the twentieth century.

It would be an interesting project to illustrate how Böll's portrayal of Ireland differs from that of some of our writers of the same period, especially John McGahern, John Broderick and Edna O'Brien. These authors struggled with the Censorship Board because of the perceived dangers their writings posed to public morality. As novelists, all they were trying to do was to capture essential elements of the Ireland with which they were familiar. In the last lines of the Epilogue Böll does mention the difficulties an Irish writer might encounter:

For someone who is Irish and a writer, there is probably much to provoke him in this country, but I am not Irish and have sufficient grounds for provocation in the country about which and in whose language I write; in fact, the Catholic provocation in the country whose language I write is enough for me. (*Journal*, p. 127)

Apparently, it was no easier to be a writer in Germany than it was in Ireland during these years. Which leads us on nicely to Böll's depiction of Catholicism in his own country. *The Clown* is a novel in which German Catholicism is not painted in a complimentary fashion. The main character, Schnier, is a clown by profession but he is nevertheless the person with the firmest grasp on reality in the book. He describes his early contact with Catholicism in school:

My parents, devout Protestants, subscribed to the postwar fashion of denominational tolerance and sent me to a Catholic school. I am not religious myself, I don't even go to church, and I make use of the sacred texts and songs for therapeutic purposes: they help me to overcome the two afflictions Nature has saddled me with: depression and headaches.²

Schnier's problems arise from the ongoing spiritual malaise of his mistress, Marie, who cannot rid herself of guilt with regard to her 'irregular' relationship with a man with no religious beliefs. Marie is the type of character who would be at home in a novel by Graham Greene. In spite of all her best efforts to live happily with the man she loves, she is haunted by a sense of her own sinfulness. For his part, Schnier is troubled by Marie's obvious unhappiness and agrees to convert to Catholicism and to marry her. But she knows that he is doing that simply to appease her and that his agnosticism is as firmly rooted in his soul as ever. The meetings of the 'Group of Progressive Catholics' inflame the hero's antipathy to what he perceives to be the circus and charade of people who use religion for their own purposes.

At the beginning of the novel we discover that Marie has left Schnier for an orthodox Catholic, Züpfner, with whom she travels to Rome to be married. The thought of them making love fills the hero with despair. He thinks back to the first time he and Marie had sex in her father's house and how afterwards she had begun to cry. When asked the reason for her tears, she replied: 'For Heaven's sake, I'm a Catholic, you know I am.' (*The Clown*, p. 41) He now realises that his fate was sealed even at this early stage. He was the one who had taken both her virginity and her religion from Marie, something for which she would

2. *The Clown*, trans. Leila Vennewitz, New York: Penguin Books, 1994, p.3.

never be able to forgive him.

The descriptions of the hero's slide into an alcoholic haze that does nothing to relieve his pain, his reliving of many events in his life, his relationship with his pious and mean mother, with his adulterous father, with the priests and Catholic friends of Marie, show him to be a man who is searching unsuccessfully for an authentic spiritual path. He is not against religion *per se* – rather against how he sees it being practised by both Protestants and Catholics of his acquaintance. As an artist he sees through the posturing of the priest, Sommerwild, with whom he has many lively exchanges:

– To listen to your sermons, anyone would imagine your heart is as big as a barn, but then you go around whispering and conniving in hotel lobbies. While I am earning my daily bread by the sweat of my brow, you are having consultations with my wife without listening to my side. Unjust and two-faced, but what can you expect from an esthete? (*The Clown*, p. 123)

He refers to Marie as his wife in the biblical sense here. What he cannot endure about Catholics is their lack of moral courage. They are connivers and hypocrites, mind-control freaks who prey on the religious scruples of people like Marie. When it comes to sex, they have a most unhealthy attitude:

In your heart of hearts you people regard it [sex] as a form of self-defence against nature – or you kid yourselves and separate the physical from that other part of it – but it is precisely that other part of it that complicates matters. (*The Clown*, p. 124)

The 'other part' to which Schnier refers is obviously the soul. In his view, when two people give themselves to each other in love, there is no sin. Marie cannot see things in this way because of the way sexuality has been presented to her as something dirty and sinful – unless within the confines of marriage, that is. This pessimistic view of the flesh is also seen to a strong degree in the novels of Edna O'Brien, who in *The Country Girls* paints a very unflattering picture of the way Irish Catholics were hung up on sex to the point where they ostracised anyone who was found 'doing it' outside marriage. Böll hints that prostitution is rife within marriage but that the Catholic Church doesn't care as long as the proprieties are seen to be observed. The hero says: 'There are some

strange unrecognized forms of prostitution compared with which prostitution itself is an honest trade: at least you get something for your money.' (*The Clown*, p. 216).

Böll rejected the title of 'Catholic Novelist' and with good reason if by this term you mean a writer who puts forward an *apologia* for Catholic dogmas and practices. Readers of *The Clown* get a far more sympathetic presentation of people living at a remove from the Catholic Church than they do of its (seemingly) most devout members. Apart from the hero, or anti-hero, the most admirable character is Marie's Marxist father, Derkum, whose anti-clericalism is obvious:

He was no longer a Catholic, he had left the church long ago, and he had spoken contemptuously to me [Schnier] of the 'hypocritical sexual morals of bourgeois society' and was furious 'with the swindle the priests carry on with marriage.' (*The Clown*, p. 38)

His attitude had no obvious impact on his daughter who, like the heroine of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, had 'caught religion like a disease.' Sarah, Greene's character, had also fallen in love with an atheist, Bendrix, whom she abandoned because of a promise made to God when she thought he had been killed in an air raid. Schnier and Bendrix are both mystified by the actions of their mistresses and feel bitterness towards a religion that precludes happiness. All Schnier has to console him is drink but its effects are all too short-lived. His father comes to see him and to offer comfort but is frightened when asked for money – he is an important and wealthy figure in media circles. He doesn't want the family name sullied by the actions of his rash son. He offers to pay for training to help Schnier to become a successful clown and fails to realise that his son has no interest in anything other than getting Marie to return to him. They fail to communicate on any meaningful level. The same is true of his brother, Leo, who is studying to become a priest and who fails to take leave from the seminary to go and see him, even though he knows that he is going through a painful period in his life.

What sort of Christian witness is this to provide? There are very few examples in the novel of Catholics or Protestants who are selfless and loving. Schnier's anti-clericalism surprises Sommerwild, who says to him: 'I have only come across that in Catholics.' (*The Clown*, p. 122) Sommer-

wild knows that anger is better than indifference and passivity, and the latter are the traits that most often characterise the Christians in this novel. Towards the end of the novel, the hero decides that he will pretend to be a Catholic:

I wanted to be a successful hypocrite and get as much fun out of it as possible. I would enjoy pretending to be a Catholic, I would 'keep to myself' entirely for six months, then start going to Sommerwild's evenings, till I began to swarm with catholicons like a festering wound with germs. (*The Clown*, p. 221)

He clearly associates Catholicism strongly with hypocrisy, which is not strange given the example provided by his mother and by a liberal priest like Sommerwild. After giving a talk one evening on the topic 'Can Modern Art Be Religious?', the priest asks Schnier if he thought he was good. His disappointment on being told that Schnier never found him good illustrates the extent to which Sommerwild is taken up with his performance rather than his content. Religion should be about helping people to live and not about being clever. Many preachers – especially those who are good at it – should take care of not falling into the trap of being in love with their oratorical skills. 'The Clown', the man of the stage, the one who is meant to play the role of actor and comedian, is less concerned with his impact on the public than is the priest. Böll's irony is cutting.

That a writer like Böll should take such a critical view of the practice of Catholicism in Germany and such a romanticised view of religion in Ireland strikes me as somewhat paradoxical. There is little, if anything, of a positive nature in his portrayal of religion in his home country. It's as if he knows that the Irish situation is not nearly as positive as the way he describes it and that he enjoys indulging his poetic licence. Note how he plays on the innocence of the young woman as she reads an article on religious tolerance in West Germany:

For the first time in the history of that country – the young woman reads – there is complete freedom of religious observance in West Germany. Poor Germany, the young woman thinks, and adds a 'Kindly Jesus, have mercy on them.' (*Irish Journal*, p. 69)

Böll enjoyed the Irish experience and liked the people. What is new

and different has an appeal and so it is that his *Irish Journal* gives a more complimentary picture of this country than he allows himself to do when describing Germany. Our writers could well have reacted in a similar manner had they travelled to Germany. I am tempted to speak of Francis Stuart in this context, but that would involve me in a very complex debate for which I am not yet ready!

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